

*Australian
Women
in Papua
New Guinea*

Colonial Passages 1920–1960

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For Isabel, and her children, Paquita and Newell, who shared her New Guinea.

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Introduction

Papua New Guinea was seen by men and women alike as a ‘man’s country’. Nevertheless there were 670 white women in Papua in 1921, almost 2000 white women in the country in 1933, and over 10 000 white women had lived in the Territory by the eve of Australian withdrawal in 1975.¹ The great majority of women went to the Territory because jobs took their husbands there, although more single women came after the 1950s as teachers, nurses and other government workers. ‘Defined in terms of her relationships with various other people the white woman was overwhelmingly the wife, mother and missus.’² Helen McLeod, the wife of a District Officer between 1948 and 1958 says ‘In colonial administration a wife is married to her husband who is married to his job’.³ Even so, wives’ experiences in the Territory were not a replica of their husbands’ experiences. Wives had different concerns—household management, motherhood—and different perspectives. In contrast with their husbands, they were more often partially disinterested bystanders and more likely to work with or at least talk to indigenous women. A number of women also went to Papua New Guinea unaccompanied by husbands, mainly as missionaries, but also as nurses, teachers, clerical and administrative workers.

Helen Callaway notes that women figure not at all in official memoirs, or appear anonymously as ‘my wife’ or ‘the wife of’.⁴ Papua New Guinea, too, has its official history, stitched together from government archives and the memoirs and biographies of administrators, male missionaries and planters. This history focusses on the colonial phenomenon. Implicitly or otherwise, Australia’s performance is measured against some notion of ‘good’ culture contact. The focus of attention is thus race relations rather than gender relations. Sir Paul Hasluck’s *A Time for Building* is a notorious

example of an official history which pays scant attention to women (of any colour).⁵ Hasluck devoted four pages to 'women's issues' and included them in 'A Mixed Bag of Social Questions'.

Records of women's experiences in Papua New Guinea are largely absent from the official narrative. Instead, women's stories are contained in a handful of white women's memoirs and the ephemera of mission booklets, often written for the immediate task of raising money or recruits at home. Wives have told the story of their husband's work, but also of their own adaptation to life in Papua New Guinea. Such books range from Dame Rachel Cleland's discussion of an administrator and his wife to Helen McLeod's story of a District Officer's wife.⁶ There are a scattering of autobiographies of unaccompanied women, for example by the naturalist Evelyn Cheeseman or Doris Booth's exploits on the Bulolo goldfields in her husband's absence.⁷

More recently, a number of academic works have sought to tell of white women's experiences in the colonies of India, Africa, Fiji and Papua New Guinea.⁸ Drawing on the perspectives of feminist scholarship, these books place a new inflection on white women's colonial experiences. They speak of white women's philanthropic work, whether in mission or plantation; they describe the restricted range of roles for women in a colony and women's negotiation of these roles; they identify the tensions between family concerns and the colonial enterprise; and they discuss the relations between white and indigenous women. In constructing this alternative history for women in the colonies, female writers have been forced to interrogate an earlier (and usually male) claim that white women, and not men, were the more racist members of colonial society. By some accounts, not only were white women more intolerant and ignorant of the colonial enterprise, their attitudes cost Britain its empire, and Australia its chance of creating a civilised Papua New Guinea. Chapter 8 takes up this debate, measuring it against the experiences of white women in Papua New Guinea.

This book is based on the experiences of nineteen women who spent time in Papua New Guinea between 1920 and 1960, a period between the hard pioneering of the firstcomers and the more rapid and regular influx of government workers from the 1960s. Some women lived in Papua New Guinea before the Second World War, and some after. Isabel Platten and Pat Murray arrived in the 1920s and returned to the Territory after the war. Women from the three major areas of colonial society—mission, government and private enterprise—are represented; and there are women who went to Papua New Guinea with husbands or family and women who chose to go on their own initiative.

The primary sources consist of edited transcripts of interviews conducted by Chilla Bulbeck and Deane Fergie and manuscripts held at the National

Library. Some interview transcripts are supplemented by diary extracts, letters, or a substantial revision of the interview materials written by the interviewee. The author's grandmother, Isabel Platten, wrote her story as a series of letters to her grand-daughter. The documentary sources held by the National Library consist of letters, diaries, speeches and records of interviews. The different documentary sources have their own interest. The varying textures of letters written to close family members, interviews given to a mere acquaintance, and speeches written for public consumption add variety to the reminiscences reproduced in this book. I have sought to preserve the individual voices of these women while also incorporating their story into the larger tale of Papua New Guinea's white history. To this end, each woman is introduced as she appears, and Appendix 1 contains biographical notes and sources for each woman. Deane Fergie and I also conducted interviews with several New Ireland New Guineans. Unfortunately, despite our attempts to include them, indigenous women spoke little during these interviews.

While male-oriented colonial histories have been told with no reference to women's history, the narrative told here is placed against the backdrop of official colonial affairs. The combination of an official and a personal register is not without its difficulties. Not all colony-building events significantly affected the lives of women concerned for their children's welfare, in the face of the domestic traumas of isolation and constant movement. Thus Judy Davis notes that men, but not women, identified their postings chronologically: 'it mattered how long [you were at an outstation], but it didn't matter when'.⁹ This book is organised to reveal the apparent timelessness of some experiences these women shared, often determined more by geography than chronology, while also noting evolutionary changes in other aspects of their lives.

Chapter 1 introduces the women as birds of passage, between the two worlds of Australia and Papua or New Guinea. For those travelling to the tropics, their own first impressions are contrasted with the tropical romances and travelogues which propelled them northwards. More women will be introduced as they share the experience of a hasty passage home ahead of the Japanese troops at Christmas in 1941. Chapter 2 discusses the different colonial societies which receive white women: government, mission or private enterprise. While the destination of white women was significant, their status was also an important influence on their lives in the Territory. Chapter 3 compares the lives of wives and mothers with those of women who came as workers. This chapter explores some of the concerns common to all women in a colony, indeed anywhere: domestic management. But it also draws out the different experiences for single women and women who

came as 'relative creatures', particularly in a discussion of that segment of colonial society to which most women came, the mission. Chapter 4 examines the third major determinant of white women's lives—whether they were thrown up on their own resources on an isolated outstation or participated in the social life of a colonial town, where their major contact with indigenous people was with their domestic staff. For readers who are largely interested in the interviewees' own experiences, these four chapters adopt that focus.

The remaining chapters write expatriate women's stories into the official history of colonial rule and the more recent analyses of white women's relationship to that rule. Chapters 5 and 6 explore the racial question, focussing on the oft-stated claim that the Second World War was a major watershed in race relations. In some ways, these chapters return to the register of official history, discussing the dominant perspectives of government, mission and private enterprise on the correct 'handling of the natives'. Missions brought 'the word'; plantation owners required land and labour; government sought order in a balancing of white demands and indigenous needs. Chapter 5 discusses political battles concerning the use of force, the alienation of land and the provision of labour for white enterprise. Chapter 6 focusses on the post-war period, exploring the role of missions and government in changing indigenous cultures, largely through the expansion of education. These chapters deal with matters of official history, but white women's experiences and reflections are woven into the account, often as a minor thread.

In contrast with official histories, the gender axis is central to this book. Chapters 7 and 8 focus on the specific issues of race and gender in the colonial setting. Chapter 7 argues that there was a circumscribed place for everyone in Papua New Guinean society, defined by both race and gender. Because white men were located at the top of the hierarchy, they can be said to have a 'position'. For white women and black men there are tensions in their subordinate position in terms of one marker but their dominant position in terms of the other: thus black men are still men but constructed as inferior to white women. These tensions find their major expression in outbreaks of hysteria concerning miscegenation.

Chapter 8 discusses the intrusion of white women into the male colonial world and the relations between European and Papua New Guinean women. Of all those who have lived in colonial societies, the voices of indigenous women are the most muffled. Even today, few speak with their own voice, and this book is unfortunately no exception. It tells the story of Papua New Guinean women only as white women have seen it. Chapter 8 also analyses the multitude of claims that women singlehandedly brought down

Empires, and thwarted civilising missions around the globe. The study of Papua New Guinea adds support to Callaway's argument that women did indeed ruin male empires, in their role as the softer face of colonialism.¹⁰

Some of the accounts are tales of action, for example Joyce Walker's experience as a nursing sister with the Methodist Mission at Mendi, told in Chapter 4. Other women reflect on the colonial experience, what it meant for them and also for the Papua New Guineans they knew; for example Isabel Platten (a missionary's wife), Mary Pulsford (an agricultural officer's wife) and Pat Andersen (a missionary's wife). Some married women faced conflicts between their husband's work and their own felt needs, describing an acute choice between the demands and desires of motherhood and the claims of the mission—for example, Grace Young and Isabel Platten. Marjorie Murphy, whose husband rose to District Commissioner, comments wistfully on the restriction of her horizons once her first child was born. Some accounts, such as those of Pat Murray and Ann Deland, deal with the conflicts between the missions, the planters and the administration. Joan Refshauge, who became second-in-command of a government department before she retired, deals with the difficulties a woman doctor faced in a man's world.

Some women, for example Ann Deland and Mollie Parer, discuss Papua New Guineans only as servants. Others, such as Pat Murray, Daphney Bridgland and Mary Pulsford, argue that relations with employees were far more complex than a simple cash-nexus. For mission workers particularly, their attention is focussed on Papua New Guineans rather than the rest of the white community, sometimes revealing strong and abiding friendships (Dorothy Pederick and Jean Mannering, for example).

The accounts also reveal the shape of daily life: running a household when provisions came infrequently; entertaining oneself when no other white woman lived close by; travelling where there were no made roads; running a hospital, school or plantation. Crises punctuated daily life and brought home to these women their exposure to potential death from snake-bite or infection; and the risks of delivering babies away from hospitals. The patterns of daily life were ruptured and changed by wider events. For planters living in Papua New Guinea in the late 1920s, the Depression significantly reduced their living standards. For missionaries, however, with access to home-grown food, the effects of the Depression were cushioned. The evacuation of women and children ahead of the Japanese invasion of New Guinea in December 1941 brought many of these women together. The nurses and other mission workers who stayed behind became prisoners of war in Japan (Dorothy Beale, for example).

Almost every woman with both pre-war and post-war experience of Papua

New Guinea sees the war as a great divide. Sisters Aquilonia Ax and Bohdana Voros, as well as a number of other women both inside and beyond the mission, comment on the devastation of the war and their austere lifestyles while buildings were being constructed, clothes and furniture made. Only two ministers of the Methodist Mission in New Guinea, Gil Platten and Rodger Brown, survived the war to return to mission work. The administration of the two colonies was brought under a single authority and civil servants were now posted to 'the other side' in an attempt to eradicate the old rivalries. A number of accounts, for example those of Dixie Rigby and Prudence Frank, point to the changed attitudes of Papua New Guineans after the war. Generally the blurring of status boundaries is not approved by the 'befores' (or B4s), those who were in the colony before the War.

Living in Papua New Guinea was also an adventure in politics. Administering the Territory was Australia's major colonial experience. All Australians have the experience of living in an ex-colony; very few have had the experience of being on the 'other side of the colonial fence', of being among the colonisers. None of these women participated directly in colonial rule as judges, *kiaps*, or district officers, but neither did any work actively for Independence during this period. There were no revolutionary Annie Besants in Papua New Guinea. None the less, some women were active participants in the delivery of education and health care, and some worked to improve the status of indigenous women.

While life in Papua New Guinea, for whites and for many Papua New Guineans, changed after the Second World War, it was Independence which irrevocably altered race relations in the country. Of those accounts that discuss changing race relations, all but two (those of Mary Pulsford and Pat Andersen), look back wistfully to the colonial days. Whatever one thinks of Australians as colonisers, the experiences these women had will never be repeated. It is trite to say that every life is unique, but these women shared a particular moment in Australian history. Few Australians have experienced the excitement, difficulties, and pleasures of living amongst a people with a completely different culture. By the time and at the places most of these women arrived, 'pacification' was complete and they were free without fear or anxiety to explore the benefits of culture contact. For some this meant little more than servants. For most, however, it meant at least a few friendships with Papua New Guineans. For all, it meant an abiding interest in a close neighbour and a time now passed into history.